Game Design Studio - Adult/Youth Collaboration at WMCAT

SKILLS

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This case example highlights what ambitious adult/youth collaboration can look like in practice, explores how a teaching artist at WMCAT managed a group process around determining the topic of a video game that teens would develop over a semester.

It's just after 3 pm, and ten teenagers are settling into their computers in a mid-sized room, clustered around tables, laptops open. Some are joking among themselves, others quietly browsing online. They're all part of the game design studio at the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology, and are about a third of the way through the semester-long program. The teaching artist for the studio, Kali, a professional game designer, shares that today they'll be continuing work on the cooking game they're developing together, which they decided earlier would be about a first year college student who's trying to learning how to cook in their dorm room. The agenda for the day is that the group will start by taking time to independently gather ideas and ideate visuals and core mechanics that might be incorporated into the game, and then later will discuss and make decisions on the overall design and theme of the game. They haven't decided exactly what the game will be in terms of genre or gameplay, and Kali floats that they'll return the idea that they'd talked about in an earlier session about whether the group wants to incorporate virtual reality into their game.

"You'll have until about 4 to do open concepting—we have sketch paper if you want to draw art that might help us figure out the look and feel of the games, you can grab stuff off google images, use illustrator, and drop ideas into our slack channel. It's called "How to Cook 101", and we don't have a title for the game, so if you want to brainstorm on that, you can."

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The group gets going, and there's a freeform, organic feel to the room. A pair of teens, sharing that they're artists, are looking for background images, another, Yolanda, is sketching out the beginnings of a coffee maker using 3D modeling software. She hits a technical roadblock in Blender, the software she's using, and one of the other teens, Bobby, gives her a hand. They move back and forth between Bobby showing her features of the software that she can use, and them talking through different ideas around what the coffee maker can look like, and, of course, swapping jokes.

The group's slack channel is being projected to the screen at the front of the room as they work, and a stream of reference images—of dorm room kitchens, pictures of cupboards, the insides of fridges—is interspersed with memes. One of the kids jokes, "Are these relevant memes?", with another responding, "They're very relevant memes!"

Isaac, one of the more vocal and experienced teens in the group, exclaims that "we don't have a programming channel!", a new chat space in their slack dedicated to ideas around how the game will be coded. Kaley responds that if there's a programming channel, there should probably also be an art channel, and so she goes ahead and creates one. "I'm just going to go and copy some of the images you guys put into the general channel and add them into the art channel." One of the teens jokes that he'd make a level-design channel, but since he's the only one interested in level-design, it would just be him in there, sending messages to himself.

As the group works, there's all sorts of little bits of feedback they give to each other about the concept art, background images, what they like, what they think does or doesn't quite fit how they've been thinking about the look of the game.

At around the 4, Kaley invites the group to come back together, and they go around the room sharing what they've been working on during the open concepting time. Interspersed with the share-out, Kaley starts to pose questions to the group about the direction of the game's overall design concept, while also sharing her thoughts.

"I'm sort of leaning more towards us doing one recipe, and then that recipe being broken up into a bunch of minigames, and then if we have time we can do another recipe."

A girl named Tina jumps in after Kaley, "Oh, oh, I have an idea. Like a mini-game where you go to the fridge to gather the ingredients. And then in the background you can have a few shelves, and like some moldy pizza that you can't cook, but then other real ingredients that you can use for the recipe."

Kaley at one point resurfaces the question of whether they want to do a game that involves using virtual reality - "What do you guys think about doing VR? If we did VR it would probably all happen in the space, like all in one level. Where Aaron mentioned, if we didn't do VR, we could jump from mini-game to mini-game." Isaac pipes up, putting in a vote for the multiple mini-game approach, and Faye agrees, adding, "The VR part will take a lot more work, and will be more difficult to test."

Kaley tests the feel of the room to see if there's a general consensus—"Is everyone ok with us not doing VR then?" Ophelia asks a clarification, if doing that would mean going 2D or 3D in the game design. Kaley responds that it would mean creating 2D minigames. The group coheres around the idea of doing the mini-games instead of going for VR, and Kaley moves the conversation forward into other areas.

Kaley: What other mini-games have you guys talked about? Is it cooking mama that someone mentioned?
Tracy: Yeah, Cooking Mama is good.
Isaac: I can see something like making cake, involving minigames of cracking eggs, mixing batter, etc..
Kaley: Thinking about that programming-wise, how would that work?

Isaac offers some ideas on how that sort of game might be coded, and from there Kaley moves the discussion towards what other sorts of mini-games they might do. One youth shares that they could think about doing something with making ramen, another adds on an idea about making stew. Kaley mentions that these are goods ideas, and that they also need to consider that anything involving liquid presents some unique technical challenges in terms of the artistic design work.

After a bit of this ideation around mini-games, Kaley moves to focus the conversation towards next steps, based on the input that the youth have shared during the prior discussion:

> *I think for right now we should focus in on one recipe and one minigame to just manage our scope, and we can move on from there. I'll document all the ideas we have, but how do you guys feel about focusing on the ramen for right now?*

There are a good number of head nods among the group, though no formal voting process. But the process flows in a way where it seems like the group is comfortable with how things are moving forward. For the last portion of the workshop Kaley and the teens brainstorm around all the artistic elements they'd need to generate in order to design the ramen mini-game.